

Tampa Bay Times

July 24, 2019

Florida heads back to school soon, this time with even more choices

By Marlene Sokol



Chikara Parks, right, along with her children in front of their home in St. Petersburg. In the back is Kamijah Laswon, 14. In front of Kamijah is her sister Tanijah Clark, 12. Their brothers are 7-year-old Tai'jon Carter, left, and Dai'quan Carbart, 9. The four children used to attend Pinellas public schools. Now they are in private schools, using Florida's tax credit scholarship program. [DIRK SHADD | Times]

ST. PETERSBURG — Chikara Parks did so much volunteering at Campbell Park Elementary School that people used to think she worked there.

Her loyalty remained even after students bullied her two oldest children. The second, Tanijah Clark, got it the worst, with taunts about her weight and hair.

Complaints to school officials went nowhere, Parks said. So, counseled by friends and teachers, she found her way to a state scholarship program and now has all four children in private schools. Wealthy and corporate donors get tax breaks for providing the funds.

It's a system that gets strong criticism from some on the left. But Parks refuses to get drawn into arguments about the politics of public education.

"It shouldn't matter," said the 33 year-old college student and former preschool teacher. "It shouldn't matter what social class that I'm in. If we are able to get our

children into better schools, we have to support it. And I feel like most of the people that have money, they don't have these issues with the schools."

Tens of thousands of parents like Parks are making similar decisions, fueling a growth of school choice options that critics equate to the privatization of public education.

Florida enters the 2019-20 school year having just doubled down on its reputation as a choice state. The Republican-led Legislature this year expanded the state's scholarship program, allowing more children to pay private school tuition with public money. And with a new Republican governor and a choice-friendly education commissioner, it's a good bet the movement will only expand.

Nearly 100,000 of Florida's children are in the tax credit scholarship program. More will be served by the new scholarship, which offers private school vouchers for the middle class and is funded directly by the state.

In charter schools, which use tax money but are run by independent and sometimes for-profit managers, there are close to 300,000 children.

And the trend lines alarm those trying to stem the exodus. Consider:

- Charter school enrollment now accounts for roughly one in 10 Florida public school students. A decade ago, it was under 5 percent.

- The tax credit scholarship program, which served 22,000 students in 2008 including 1,788 in the Tampa Bay area, has increased nearly fivefold. At last count, there were 11,000 scholarship recipients in Hillsborough, Pasco, Pinellas and Hernando counties. In Hillsborough alone, 94 private schools were accepting students.

Both systems fall under the umbrella of educational "choice," loosely defined as any time a student

attends something other than a neighborhood public school. By that definition, proponents say close to half of all children are exercising options that include magnet schools and, unique to Pinellas, fundamental schools that rely on strong parental involvement.

In a more narrow sense, choice puts public dollars into the hands of churches and for-profit businesses. Critics say it depletes the government-run systems of the funds they need to meet student needs that can be costly if the child is disabled, or at a disadvantage related to poverty of family instability.

“The public schools don't turn any kid away,” said Mike Gandolfo, president of the Pinellas County teachers union. “We provide for kids with English as a second language. We provide for kids that are (learning disabled). We provide for every kid.”

Opponents of charter schools say they are selective in which children they admit, and are not held to the same standards as district-run schools.

Those claims are not entirely true. The state does require charter schools to hire certified teachers and administer the yearly Florida Standards Assessment exams.

Private schools, which accept the vouchers and scholarships, have a lot more latitude.

Campaigning for the new scholarship program at a Tampa Christian school this year, Gov. Ron DeSantis told reporters, “If the taxpayer is paying for the education, it's public education.”

Union leaders, however, are hoping to mount a legal challenge, similar to one that stopped an earlier voucher program designed by former Gov. Jeb Bush.

“If the governor is going to change the definition of what a public school is by saying that any school that receives public money is public school, then every school needs to be held to the same level of accountability as traditional public schools,” Gandolfo said.

The story of Parks and her children illustrates the sensitivity that surrounds the issue of choice. Parks at first did not want to specify the school where her children had trouble. She soon relented, but made it clear that the school had, and still has, some very good teachers.

Kamijah Lawson, now 14, was the first of her children to be treated rudely by the other students at school. But, Kamijah and her mother agreed, she was able to avoid reacting to her tormentors. “With her, she would swallow it,” Parks said.

Tanijah, 12, was not as fortunate. She grew visibly upset when the children singled her out and insulted her. “It hurt,” she said. Parks came to believe that “at that school, that's just something they did.”

Parks, while going through channels to report the bullying, tried to involve other parents, and community leaders. She wanted to raise awareness and improve the school.

Leaving became an option when teachers suggested Kamijah would thrive at Academy Preparatory Center, which uses the state scholarship program to offer a private school type of experience to children from low-income families.

After she learned how to apply, Parks made similar arrangements for Tanijah, and then for her two younger sons. “It was the best decision ever,” she said.

School districts have met the growth of choice with a variety of responses.

Some Florida school districts are becoming embroiled in costly legal battles as they seek to slow the trend by denying charter applications.

Others have not yet felt the strong pull of private sector alternatives.

In Hernando County, officials said little has changed in the past few years, with the exception of more home-schooled children. The county has two charter schools, which together enrolled 343 students last year.

In Hillsborough, charters are a relief valve as the district struggles to meet the needs of new residents.

“In the southern part of the county, where I live, the population is growing faster than the district can build schools,” said Rob Kriete, president of the Hillsborough Classroom Teachers Association. “So the charters are opportunistic in that regard. They can build their schools quicker and get into different spots. It's a problem for us.”

Districts are trying to become competitive, both in what they offer and how they market their schools.

In Hillsborough, the planned new ventures include International Baccalaureate programs at Greco Middle and Alonso High, and a technology program at Just Elementary, a historically high-poverty school that will also get a name change as part of its rebranding.

Pasco County public schools are also taking steps to expand choice offerings including more IB programs. “We want to make sure we're responsive to what our community is looking for,” superintendent Kurt Browning told business leaders this year when he unveiled Project RISE, a revitalization campaign for schools in the western part of the county.

But the competition is continuing to push hard, saying the district isn't doing enough.

Charter Schools USA, the Fort Lauderdale for-profit operator, is involved in two planned K-8 “innovation preparation” academies — one near Wesley Chapel and a second between Zephyrhills and Trinity.

And RISE, based in Palm Beach County, wants to open a school for grades six through nine in the Wynfields development, also near Wesley Chapel.

An entirely different dynamic surrounds “Schools of Hope,” a program conceived by state education commissioner Richard Corcoran when he was Speaker of the House. The state bypasses districts, in a sense, and brings high-quality, not-for-profit operators directly into

Florida to open schools in neighborhoods that are served by low-performing schools.

At the State Board of Education meeting on July 17, Corcoran commended Hillsborough superintendent Jeff Eakins for his collaboration with IDEA, a Texas-based operator that meets these criteria and will open its first four Florida schools in 2020. Eventually, they will serve about 3,000 students.

Kriete, the Hillsborough labor leader, is aware that private sector options are meeting many families' needs, and that, politically, charters and vouchers enjoy support from all race and income groups.

But he contends that, overall, district-run school systems offer a more complete education, particularly in high school, and that it's incumbent on them to tell that story.

"We believe our public schools are stronger at preparing kids for reading, math, social science, the sciences," he said.

"We do a better job of teaching kids and getting kids ready for the real world. I believe we're doing the

very best we can in Hillsborough and around the state to promote all the great things we do and offer for kids. But promotion takes time and energy and money and we're not given funds to promote all the things we are doing."

At Parks' home in St. Petersburg, the results speak for themselves.

Kamijah, after struggling at first in math, buckled down and paid more attention in class until she caught up.

Tanijah no longer felt like an outcast. "I started socially interacting with the girls, and it was easier. There's going to be some drama, but it wasn't as much as it was at my old school."

Parks said she is the first to acknowledge that private school isn't perfect, it's not for everybody, and things do go wrong. But she's pleased with the response she has seen when her children run into trouble.

"The staff lets you know that they're on top of this, this is what we're doing, we're going to take care of it," she said.